

## The Home of God Among Mortals

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The First Sunday After Epiphany  
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### **Genesis 3: 3-5, 8-10 NRSV**

God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.” But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise.

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

### **Revelation 21:1-8**

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

‘See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.’

And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ Then he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.’

## **From Emanuel Swedenborg AC 204 (Elliott)**

'If they ate from the fruit of the tree their eyes would be opened' means that if they did probe into matters of faith from sensory perception and factual knowledge, that is, from themselves, they would see plainly that it was not so. 'They would be like God, knowing good and evil' means that if they did so from themselves they would be like God and could be their own guides.

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This Sunday is the first Sunday after Epiphany. Epiphany is traditionally celebrated on the day of January 6<sup>th</sup>, by the calendar we use. The original Greek word means “appearance, or miraculous phenomenon” and the word epiphany has been used by theologians in association with several different events in the life of Jesus. The Epiphany of Christ was considered a miracle; the revelation of God in human form, in the birth of Jesus. The observance of this sacred day has multiple origins: the Eastern Christian Churches like the Greek Orthodox, celebrated Epiphany as the birthday of Christ, it has been associated with the visit of the Magi, and it has also been connected to the baptism of Jesus by in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. Of course the central theme of all of these reasons for celebrating Epiphany is the recognition of the presence and the revealing of God to humankind. I chose two other readings that also speak of God's presence: in Genesis in the Garden of Eden and the prophecy of Revelation to look at part of what it means to have God in the world.

I confess to you there is no topic, no subject that moves me more than this idea. When I meditate, sit in contemplation, or pray over this understanding, this revelation, something shifts in me, takes hold of me, in a way that I find difficult to communicate directly, so I am going to use a couple of stories, and then come back to today's lessons.

There is a Buddhist story about two frogs: One frog lived in a well, very comfortable within the walls that defined his world. He had everything he needed, especially water. One day another frog, a pilgrim, came along and quenched his thirst at the well, and he struck up a

conversation with the Frog of the Well. The Pilgrim Frog told the Frog of the Well about many marvelous things outside the walls of the well, including a story about an even larger source of water. The Frog of the Well had to see this, so he left his well and traveled with the Pilgrim Frog to the shore of the ocean. Upon seeing the ocean, the understanding of what the Frog of the Well could see gradually increased to the point where his head exploded. Here ends the story.

When I think about the home of God being among mortals, I sometimes feel like the Frog of the Well when he is standing at the shore of the ocean.

Another Buddhist story: Soon after giving birth a woman's child became ill and died. There might not be any suffering greater than a mother's grief at the loss of the life that emerged from her body, and this woman's suffering was so great she took the body of the child from holy man to holy man asking for help. No one was able to give her help because she wanted what seemed impossible, she wanted her child brought back to life, but one man told her to take the child to the Buddha, that he was the only one who could help her. She took her child and placed the body at the feet of the Buddha and asked him to bring it back to life. The Buddha said he would help her, but she would first have to get a mustard seed from the home of a family that had not experienced death. So she went searching and so great was her love for her child that she searched for days and days, approaching each door with hope and anticipation, only to find that death had visited every home. When she became exhausted she returned to the Buddha and fell down at his feet and cried until all of her being was the same as the emptiness she felt in her heart when her baby died, then she slept, and when she awoke the first thing she saw was compassion in the eyes of the Buddha and she asked him to teach her about truth.

What I like about these stories is that you don't have to get caught up in the literal reality of these stories in order to understand the truth in them. For some reason many people tend to want that with the Bible stories.

Now, in Genesis, curiously, even though God warns Adam and Eve that they will die the day they eat the fruit, the snake turns out to be right: Adam and Eve do not physically die that day. The real result is the rest of the story about humanity is set in motion: Cain murders Abel and in some ways it is not too hard to imagine that in spite of all the events of history set out before us to learn, we have not progressed very far at all from that moment. In Revelation, we hear about those who are evil, “their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” Over and over we are being shown that death is not what we believe it to be, and like the woman whose baby died, our relationship to death needs a healthy dose of truth in order for us to wake up from the illusions of our attachments and desires.

But also, we are reminded over and over that God is with us, God is present just as in the Garden of Eden, God is within us, just as we are told in Revelation about the “second coming,” “it is already done.” No matter how many stories we hear about God coming, ultimately we need to understand that it is not God that needs to arrive, but us. God is in the Garden. The ocean is present, even when we are in the well like the frog, we need to get out of the confinement we live in.

I feel a great deal of debt and gratitude to the writers of these stories, for they have struggled mightily in writing these stories to teach us important truths. But it is up to us to take these truths and make some progress in our own lives.

Why don’t we make better use of these truths?

Because we objectify God, and as a consequence we objectify good and evil, and we place them outside of us, when in reality all of these things exist inside us. In other words, we lose sight of the fact that God is within us, and we attach meaning to the wrong things.

Many of us have been told about the suffering of Jesus and the redemption of humanity through his suffering. Unfortunately, this idea has been distorted into the idea that somehow,

through our suffering we become acceptable to God, that we are purified by our suffering, or that this is the model behavior we are called to emulate. In Islam, the martyr is not necessarily one who suffers as a consequence of belief, but rather it is one who acts, through holy war, jihad, and sacrifices their life for God. In one tradition the suffering is not chosen, rather it is something to bear, the emulation is in the acceptance. In the other it is chosen and the emulation is in the action.

I want you to understand that I know I have made some very broad generalizations here, and I don't want anyone to think these issues are easily resolved, or that there are easily discoverable answers to the questions we are considering. But both of these perspectives lead, if we are not careful to a distorted understanding of freedom and truth, and both of them have to do with understanding the presence of God in the world.

#### What are the distortions?

There is no doubt we all suffer and we are all wounded during our lives, some much worse than others, some of this suffering is inflicted by others, some of it we inflict on ourselves. There is no doubt that as a consequence of evil, someone will suffer, as C. S. Lewis once remarked. I believe we are called to take our suffering and our wounding and turn them into our strengths. Why? Because we are born as a consequence of God's love, just like Jesus in the Christmas story, there is inherent value in us as human beings and part of our purpose, I believe, is to make the highest possible use of the gifts we are given, and the gifts that we earn. If identify with our wounding and our brokenness we choose not to be empowered by God's love, we choose to let our brokenness define us rather than letting God define who we are. Now, please don't take my statement to mean that everyone that suffers chooses to suffer. I am not interested in blaming the person suffering. Whether self-inflicted, or inflicted by the world, a wounded person needs our support and help, but not the kind of support or help that contributes to their powerlessness. Our

help needs to contribute to their empowerment and part of that is understanding the reality of their wounds. But it is important to understand that Jesus did not choose suffering as his path to God. Suffering, in and of itself, is not holy. There is no doubt he knew he would suffer, but his choice was for truth, for justice, for forgiveness and redemption, for love, the same choices we have.

There are important questions for us to consider. Are we suffering because we are choosing truth and love? And, what is our response to suffering? Are we blaming others? I have seen people use their suffering in many ways to manipulate others, to get what they want. Where is our emphasis, on what is outside of us, or what is inside of us? I said once before that true justice was forgiveness. One of the reasons is that forgiveness, of others and forgiveness of ourselves, empowers us and reveals the God that is in us. This is the miraculous moment of an epiphany.

What about the other model of martyrdom? I don't think there is any doubt about the level of desperation and hopelessness that leads to suicide bombing. That is part of the reason it is so effective, and there is the temptation to believe that someone so desperate must be operating from a position of truth, and perhaps they are, but what truth? That somehow, through threat and violence, we will change someone's mind? Violence, on the contrary, causes us to disengage, not engage. It causes us to fight and resist rather than co-exist. In this situation we encounter what Swedenborg warns us about when he tells us to beware of truth disconnected from love, compassion, and wisdom. We do not save people by taking away their freedom or their lives, or through trying to convince them that death is the best alternative to living in the world.

There is a very wise statement by Epictetus: Our duties are revealed by our relationship to each other.

Going back to the readings from today. How many ways can we die besides the transition known as physical death? There is the death of innocence, perhaps the first death God was referring to in the Garden of Eden when he said “on the day you eat of this tree you will surely die”, it is the time when we become aware of our own evil thoughts and deny them. The second death, is a spiritual death, when we know better, and we still lie, when we still choose evil, when we choose separation from God.

God is here, among us and within us now. How can we reveal God? Let's look at the reading from Swedenborg: “If they ate from the fruit of the tree their eyes would be opened” means that if they did probe into matters of faith from sensory perception and factual knowledge, that is, from themselves, they would see plainly that it was not so.” What is not so, that they would not die? as the serpent predicted? In this story, the serpent's use of death is a big distraction, and we should know that whatever distracts us is not the real story. If you are distracted by sex, money or power, are those the real issues? Those issues are usually about self-esteem and integrity. The problem is that Adam and Eve, in the story in Genesis, believed that wisdom, knowledge of good and evil, could be understood through their senses, when in reality you explore and understand matters of wisdom through faith and love of God. Their eyes are not opened; they did not receive wisdom. That we are spiritual beings, that we live in a spiritual world, where God is eternally present, the key elements that help us understand and witness the presence of God, are faith, love, and truth. To see God, you cannot separate them and make them individual pursuits, you need them joined together to discover wisdom. If we understand that I guess you could say we are making progress.

We celebrate Epiphany precisely to acknowledge the revelation, the revealing of the presence of God. If we forget this we lose our connection to the source of all that is good. If we forget this we can be so consumed by our grief, our woundedness, or our suffering; and like the

woman that lost her child, we go from door to door searching for something that does not exist. Or, if we forget, we might think that the best way to solve the problem of our own suffering is to inflict suffering on others.

It takes something like the birth of a child to awaken us to that part of us that is always present, that has always been present within us, that has made its home among us.